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Marine Officer Training Staying Low-Tech

Quantico Emphasizes 'Basic Warfighting-Making You Hot, Tired and Dirty'

by Harold Kennedy

At the beginning of a new century, focused increasingly on the use of high technology in warfare, the U.S. Marines still are training their officers the old-fashioned way-quick, dirty and decidedly "low tech."



"Marine Officer Candidate School (OCS) hasn't changed in 20 or 30 years," explained Col. George J. Flynn, the school's commanding officer. "We don't think technology has any effect on training leaders." Just having completed an early morning, four-mile run, he sat down in his office recently to explain his program to National Defense.

"We teach basic warfighting-making you hot, tired and dirty and seeing if you make good decisions," Flynn said. "Do you keep trying, or do you quit? Can you overcome obstacles? Can you cope with chaos? You have to want to become a Marine."

The Marines have been recruiting officers since their founding in Philadelphia, in 1775. That year's quota was for 10 officers. Of the 173,000 men and women in today's Marine Corps, almost 18,000 are officers. Keeping those ranks full requires about 1,625 new officer candidates each year, according to Capt. Jeffrey Sammons, a spokesman for the Marine Corps Recruiting Command. The Marine Corps has been successful in meeting that goal for more than four years, despite a dwindling supply of recruits and a refusal by some colleges to cooperate with recruiters, Marine Commandant James L. Jones told National Defense.

The recruiters have met their goals by "showing some ingenuity," said Sammons. "If they can't get on college campuses, they go to where the students hang out-to the malls and the Internet" he explained.

Not everybody who applies can qualify to become a Marine officer. To be accepted, candidates must be either a full-time college student with a

grade point average of 2.0 or better or a graduate with at least a four-year degree. Candidates also must be under 27 1/2 years of age to qualify for flight training or under 30 for all other assignments.

All Marine officers receive a large portion of their basic training at the sprawling Marine Corps Base at Quantico, Va., on the Potomac River, 35 miles south of Washington, D.C. The Marines have trained their officers at Quantico's 100-square-mile base since 1917. The training comes in two parts:

- OCS, which provides initial training for all would-be Marine officers, except for those who graduate from the Naval Academy. Graduates of the academy receive their basic military training there.
 - The Basic School, a longer course of study designed to provide all new Marine lieutenants-including academy graduates-with a professional-level military education focused on the requirements of the Corps.
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OCS comes in several formats, Flynn explained. College students, who opt for the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) and want to become Marines, spend a month to six weeks each summer of their college career in training.

Those who sign up for the Platoon Leaders Class can elect either to attend two six-week summer sessions in their freshman or sophomore year, or they can choose a single 10-week course in the summer following their junior year. College seniors and graduates can elect to attend an Officer Candidate Class, a 10-week session that can occur at any time after graduation.

The goal for all of these options is the same, Flynn said, "to train, evaluate and screen officer candidates to ensure that they possess the moral, intellectual and physical qualities and the leadership potential to serve successfully as company-grade officers in the Fleet Marine Force."

Developing Lieutenants

The kind of training offered at OCS, he said, is dramatically different from that found either at the Naval Academy or at enlisted boot camps at Parris Island and San Diego.

"Unlike the academy-where I graduated-we only have the candidates for a few short weeks," Flynn said. "We have to make the most of it."

During that time, Flynn explained, the goal is to develop "a lieutenant who has exhibited the potential to think and to lead under the stress of combat." This, he said, is quite different from enlisted training, which is designed to produce "basic Marines who will obey, react and follow" during battle.

Thus, unlike enlisted boot camp, Flynn said, OCS doesn't begin "with a lot of screaming and shouting" when the drill instructor picks up his platoon. "The candidates are kind of shocked because it begins so quietly," he noted. The pace, however, quickly picks up.

The instructors assemble their assigned platoon in a classroom and then "they have a little contest to see who can empty out the classroom the fastest."

The instructor's job, Flynn explained, is "to create chaos and confusion." The candidate's job, he added, is to learn how to make decisions, even to lead under those conditions.

"They're not checking into a Holiday Inn," Flynn said. "They're going to live in a squad bay with 50 of their new-found closest friends."

"It's a culture shock for most of them," Flynn said. Unlike previous generations, fewer than 10 percent of them have relatives with military experience.

"They come here, and they're clueless," Flynn said. "Their knowledge of the military is limited to what they see on television."

Welcome to the Marines

Once at OCS, the candidates get a quick immersion into military culture. They learn such subjects as close-order drill, weapons handling and care, fireteam and squad-level tactics, map reading and hand-to-hand combat. They study Marine Corps history.

"We teach them that they are inheriting a proud legacy, and that they have to carry on that legacy," said Flynn.

The candidates learn to hike with full combat gear-including rifle, pack and camouflaged helmet-starting with distances of three miles and building to 11 to 15 miles.

Physical training is emphasized. Recruiters warn candidates that they "must be in excellent physical condition when arriving at OCS, or you may risk physical injury."

When they arrive at OCS, instructors note, men should be able to perform a minimum of three pull ups and 50 stomach crunches and to run three miles in 28 minutes. Women-who make up 8 to 10 percent of the candidates-should be able to perform a flexed-arm hang for a minimum of 15 seconds and 50 stomach crunches and to run three miles in 31 minutes.

It may take candidates up to 12 weeks of physical training beforehand to get in shape for OCS, the recruiters advise.

Candidates are required to buy their own running shoes, preferably before they arrive at OCS.

At OCS, "we run with the candidates," said Flynn. "We do the confidence course with them. We exercise with them. The sergeant major is out there

with them right now. We take pride in setting the example."

Despite its best efforts, the Marine Corps has a long history of training accidents. Just last July, an enlisted Marine collapsed and died after an eight-mile night conditioning hike during infantry training at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Coping with Heat Injuries

OCS tries to avoid heat-related injuries, particularly during summer months, when most candidates attend the school. Reveille-morning wakeup-is early, at 5 a.m., when it is still cool. Also, said Flynn: "We make sure they get their electrolytes."

Every platoon has a Navy corpsman, or medic, and an ambulance to accompany the unit during exercise, he said. Lastly, he noted, OCS operates its own medical clinic specializing in sports-like injuries. Medically, he said, "we treat our candidates like major-league football players."

The final exercise in Marine officer training is a three-day ordeal called the OCS Crucible, which emphasizes teamwork under stress. It begins at midnight and includes nighttime hikes, bivouacs, and combat squad maneuvers.

By the time it is over, candidates will have dealt with a dozen or more squad attack problems-both day and night-and completed 45 miles of hiking or running in full combat gear. On the third day, the tired, dirty and hungry candidates get a helicopter ride to the Basic School, a resupply mission and a run of the NATO Obstacle Course. The Crucible culminates with a tour of the Basic School and a "warrior meal," their first opportunity to dine with the second lieutenants attending the school.

All throughout OCS, the candidates are being evaluated by their instructors, who are all non-commissioned officers. "On graduation day, the candidates become second lieutenants, senior to the instructors," said Flynn. "The instructors have a vested interest in choosing good leaders."

The evaluation goes on 24 hours a day, seven days-even on weekends, when the candidates, unlike enlisted recruits, get "liberty," or time off-Flynn said. "We just had a candidate who thought he could go to the post exchange in flip flops, with his pants hanging off his hips," he explained. "However, he ran into his platoon sergeant, who immediately sent him back to the barracks. He may not get liberty this weekend."

Unlike enlisted recruits, officer candidates are free to drop out at any time, Flynn pointed out. "We won't force anybody to accept a commission," he said.

About 83 percent of the candidates, on average, successfully complete the training and become officers, Flynn said. "On commissioning day, there's not a prouder group of young men and women anywhere, because they have earned the right to be called U.S. Marine officers," Flynn said.

